1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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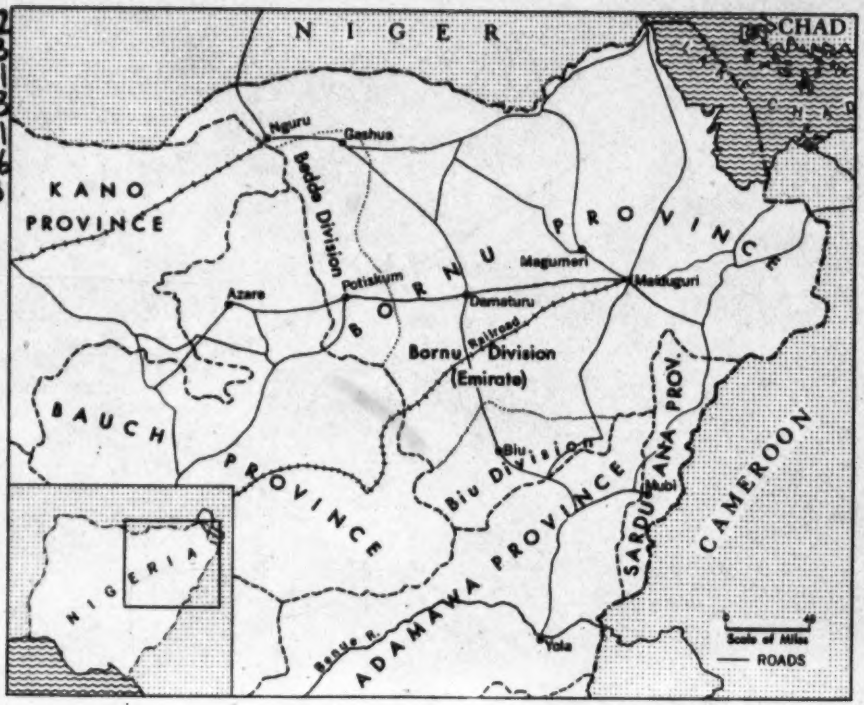

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1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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The Setting

The Land and the People

FOR AT LEAST a thousand years the drama of empires rising, falling, expanding, and shrinking has been played out in an immense area of Africa at the southern edge of the Sahara known as the Sudan. These states, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, the Hausa kingdoms, Kanem-Bornu, Baghirmi, Wadai, Darfur, and others like them, from the upper Senegal River basin to the upper Nile, form a band from east to west across Africa. Their histories provide some of the most resplendent grandeur of Africa's past. Many of these states have now been consigned to the history books; Ghana and Mali have disappeared although modern countries have resuscitated their names; Songhai was destroyed by the Moroccans at the end of the sixteenth century; the Hausa states were altered as they came under the hegemony of the Fulani Empire of Sokoto at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and little is known as yet about the early states to the east of Lake Chad. On the other hand, Bornu in the northeastern corner of Nigeria has continued its sovereignty in the Chad Basin throughout a millennium of tribulations and triumphs and it goes on today organized as a separate emirate within Bornu Province.

Like most of the Sudan, Bornu is open savannah country, generally quite flat except for a few stable dunes covered with scrub in the north and several long low ridges running northwest to southeast in the southern part of the country. The ridges are probably ancient lake-shores of a great inland sea whose contemporary remnant is Lake Chad—a large shallow fresh water lake into which flow a number of rivers from the south and west. The soil is sandy and covered with scrub bush grass, and scattered trees, mostly thorny ones, except for the large spreading boabab, which dots the horizon here and there. In the 1930s the Nim, a hardy shade tree from India that thrives on the semi-desert conditions of northern Nigeria, was introduced to provide some forest preserves and year round shade in the villages. Here and there, especially at the bottom of the ridges, are large flat surfaces of hard clay that turn into gray-black mud during the rainy season. These provide clay for building materials and pottery, as well as water holes for the cattle of local villages and wandering nomads.

101 This study was carried out among the Kanuri people of Bornu Province, Northern Nigeria. The writer and his wife were in Nigeria from August, 1956 until October, 1957. Almost all of that time was spent in the town of Geidam, in the northern part of the province.

A. Geography

131 1. Major geographic features.

Bornu Province is in the northeastern corner of Nigeria. It is bounded to the north by what was then Niger Territory, French West Africa (now the independent Republic of the Niger). [193] To the east lie the marshy shores of Lake Chad and, south of the lake, Cameroons, trusteeship territory administered as part of Bornu Province. The Yobe River, largest of the rivers flowing through Bornu into Chad, forms the northern border of the [161] province for much of its length. Maiduguri, the provincial capital, population 56,740, lies roughly in the geographic cen- [191] ter of the province. The main road through the province runs from Jos through Maiduguri and then on to Fort Lamy in Chad. [196] The railroad barely penetrates into Bornu, running from Kano and ending in the northwest tip of Bornu at Nguru, the second largest town in the province.

133 Bornu is a huge sandy plain, contrasting sharply with the rugged country of the Bauchi Plateau, which rises steeply to the southwest. South of the plain is the hilly area of Biu which is in Bornu Province. The flat plain extends eastward,

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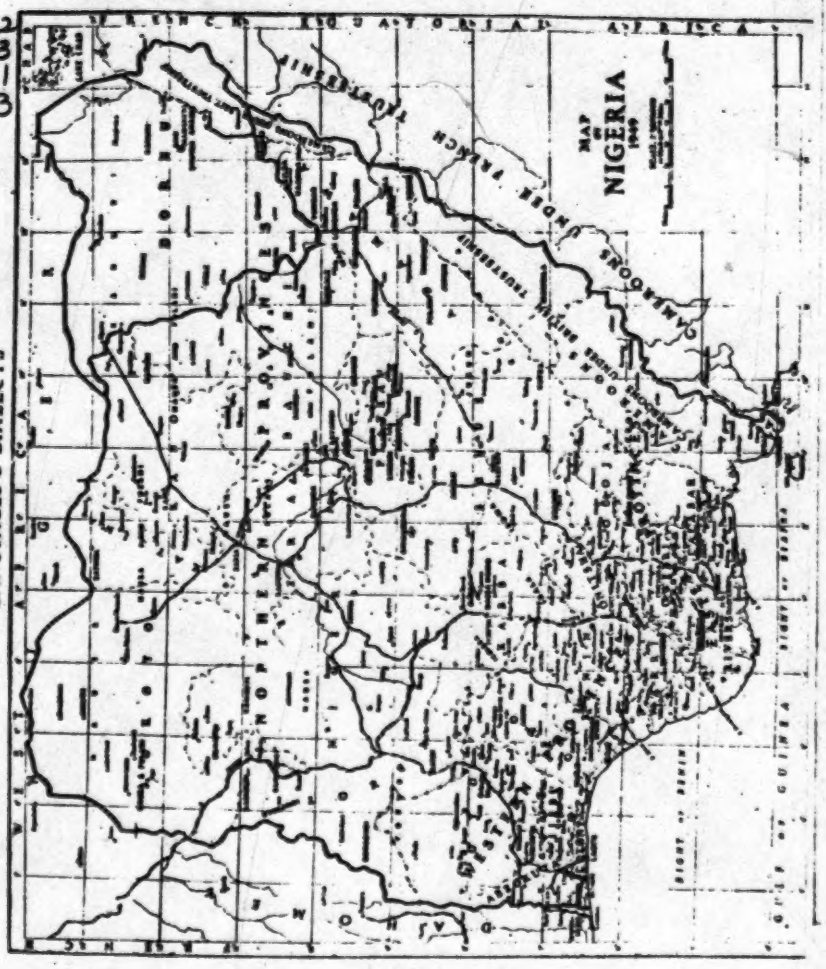

Figure 1 - Map of Nigeria

133 south of Lake Chad, into the Cameroons. Here the fingertips of the great Cameroon highland range, steep and impenetrable, extend into the flatlands.

2. The Nature of the Land.

The sweep of the horizon, as one travels in Bornu proper, is unbroken by hills. But as one goes north from Maiduguri toward Geidam, the land perceptibly rises and falls, and in the neighborhood of the town of Geidam these rises become steep. On close examination one notices that the rises are really no more than dunes, their inner consistency concealed by the cov-
137 ering vegetation. The natural vegetative cover here is sparse, limited largely to a profusion of low shrubs and bushes, most of them thorny. Much of the year the grass is brown and parched.
[134] However the sandy soil is fertile. Immediately following the beginning of the rains, early in May, the new shoots begin to grow and soon the thick, coarse grass covers everything. Like the low bushes, the grass brings its harvest of burrs and thistles. In heavily watered places one may see copses of trees, but by far the most impressive tree characteristic of the area is the baobab or kuka (Adansonia digitata). Baobabs are relatively tall, but their huge thickness of trunk gives them a distorted appearance which is heightened by gnarled, twisted, stunted limbs. They grow in solitary splendor, and are used as land marks because of their prominence against the flat line of the horizon. Again, traveling north toward Geidam, one notices that the water

137 courses are marked increasingly by dum palm trees (Cucifera Thebaica), and this heightens the impression that the border of the great Sahara desert lies not far away.

133 Because of the flatness of the land, rain water does not drain readily into streams and rivers. Low areas become marshes, roads become quagmires, and towns are completely cut off. The Yobe, a slow, meandering river, flows throughout the year though it may dwindle to a width of twenty-five feet in the dry season. At some time in July its flood reaches Geidam and it then swells to a width of half a mile.

3. Rainfall and Temperature.

132 The agricultural productivity of the region is determined completely by the amount of rainfall. The rainy season begins in early May and lasts until October. Sporadic rains mark its beginning. During its height it may rain every other day, usually at evening time for half an hour to an hour. The storm clouds can be seen gathering in the east in the late afternoon. A strong warning wind precedes the rain, which descends in sheets. At times during the rainy season, from a slight rise of ground, one can see several distinct storms on the horizon, the distant columns of mist falling from their individual clouds. During this time of the year the temperature is moderate and pleasant.

The rains steadily decrease in frequency and come to a halt in October. A brief hot season follows, lasting until December when the cold sets in. For several months the temperature drops

121 individual character, to an entire culture, many times the size of his single community.

The present study is, then, a community study, as must [101] usually be the case in the study of complex societies. The community is the town of Geidam, where the author and his wife lived for one year, from the ending of the rains in 1956 until the rains ceased once again in 1957.

A. The geography and ecology of Geidam.

162 632 Geidam, with its population of 11,032 is one of the largest towns in Bornu Province (see Table I) and represents urban Kanuri 563 culture. The people of the countryside between Geidam and 197 Nguru, some 110 miles to the west, are predominantly Manga, a Kanuri sub-group speaking a Kanuri dialect which differs slightly from Kanuri proper. To the east, towards Damasak, are Mobber, 101 another sub-group. In the town of Geidam, however, the towns- 197 [369] folk are Kanuri, and speak standard Kanuri. This is primarily because urban Kanuri in Geidam have more in common with urban Kanuri coming from other large towns and cities, and share more with them than they do with the farming peoples of the small villages surrounding Geidam.

131 Geographically, Geidam lies in the northernmost part of the province, in fact, the northernmost part of Nigeria, since the border separating Nigeria from the independent country of 133 Niger is only twenty miles north. The land is a flat sandy [137] plain, with scrub vegetation, which becomes increasingly more

[GEIDAM]

133 [137] [162] desert-like as one moves north from Geidam. The population to the north of Geidam continues to be Kanuri (or Manga), but its density declines rapidly as one moves directly north. Geidam lies on the Yobe River, usually referred to as the Komadugu Yobe River, a redundancy since komadugu means river in the Kanuri language. The Yobe is a slowly moving stream that empties into Lake Chad, approximately 100 miles east of Geidam. Many streams and rivers of the north flow for some months after the rains and then dry up completely. The Yobe, however, is large enough to continue to flow the year round. Before the rains it is reduced to a stream thirty or forty feet in width; after the rains the river reaches its flood crest, when it may extend over half a [505] mile in width. Though one could travel from Geidam to Lake Chad on the Yobe River, the Kanuri do not use the river for travel or [172] for commerce. Along the Yobe river, some twenty miles east of Geidam, lie the ruins of Birni Ngazargamo, the ancient capital of the Mais which was sacked by the Fulani. Hence Geidam is not [36] far from the old center of empire. Along the river, and still further on, along the shores of Lake Chad, are numerous villages and towns.

131 [134] The geographic location of Geidam, aside from the drier sandy nature of the land because of its northern location, is significant because of its situation in relation to Maiduguri, 131 633 491 the provincial capital, and to Nguru, the rail-head. Maiduguri, in the center of the province (see Figure 2), is important both because it is the administrative and commercial capital and be-

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177 been left out of the historical accounts of the area or have been played down so considerably that the reader finds it easy to forget that the Sudan is geographically adjacent to the Guinea coast. Lady Lugard (1) set the style for this kind of thinking when she described the Sudan as "facing north". Yet the gold, the slaves, and the lowly kola-nut, which became popular as an article of consumption from Kano to Tripoli, all required well established relationships and contacts between the peoples of the Sudan and those to the south of them from very early times.

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197 Evidence on the early beginning of the Kanuri people is scant. Linguistically they belong to the central Saharan group of languages which extends like a boot into modern northeastern Nigeria, but for the most part takes up the area of the central Sahara, reaching north to include a good portion of Fezzan, all of Tibesti, and stretching eastward in the desert until it meets the Afro-Asiatic group of languages, the so-called Hamito-Semitic group. (2) Greenberg comments on the distinctiveness of the central Saharan group of tongues, and we may safely attribute to them a respectable time depth. Gautier (3) has shown that Lake Chad delivered water into the Berku region in past times. According to another writer (4) the whole territory northeast of Lake Chad was a great swampy shallow area until the early centuries of the Christian era. This was maintained by the overflow through a river valley (the Bahr el Ghasal) which is now only a dry depression. The surplus Chad water still flows along this passage today beneath the soil. Less than a century ago, Nachtigal (5) saw the first

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(1) Shaw, F.L. (Lady Lugard), A Tropical Dependency (London), 1905, p.3.
(2) Greenberg, J.H., Studies in African Linguistic Classification: IV Hamito-Semetics, SWJ, 6, 1950.
(3) Gautier, E.F., Sahara the Great Desert, (London) 1935, pp.68-69.
(4) Tilho, J., in Geographic Journal LVI, 1920, quoted in Carpenter, Rhys, A Trans-Saharan Caravan route in Herodotus, Americal Journal of Archeology, Vol. 60, 1956, p. 240.
(5) Nachtigal, G., Sahara und Sudan, p. 77ff

174 133 80 miles of its bed in flood and boats being used in these seasonal swamps.(1) Carpenter feels that it was these wet lands south of the Fezzan rather than the Niger that Etearchus spoke of to Herodotus. It seems reasonable to suppose that as these enormous wet lands dried up central Saharan speaking peoples followed the course of this retreat and moved slowly over the centuries into the Chad basin, or at least concentrated more densely in this geographically favourable area.

175 Until more historical and archeological research has been carried out, it would be wise to neglect some of the later writers' fanciful reconstructions and to concur with the ever careful Barth, in speaking of the first centuries of the Kanuri kingdom as its "silent beginnings".(2)

175 797 Most scholars are agreed that the rulers of Bornu embraced Islam somewhere around the end of the 11th century. El Bekri writing circa 1067 A.D. speaks of the people of Kanem as idolators.(3) However it is most likely that besides consulting merchants and travellers, he was consulting older [173] texts on the subject. The king lists all agree on the fact that Mai (king) Hume (1085-1097 A.D.) died in Egypt on the way to Mecca, and it is upon this evidence that Islam is at present dated in Bornu.(4)

[177] Urvoy feels that this contact with Islam brought with it the knowledge of expansionism, powerful monarchy, and the idea of tributaries.(5) Whether this is true, or whether Islam only enhanced tendencies

175 642 already present is impossible to say at present. Whatever the answer, it is recorded that the son of the above mentioned Hume, Dunama I (1097-1150 A.D.) expanded the little state of Kanem, northeast of Lake Chad, into

(1) Carpenter, Rhys, op.cit. p. 239.
(2) Barth, H. Travels in North and Central Africa, Vol.II (London) 1857, p. 643.
(3) El Bekri, quoted in Barth, H. op. cit., p. 634.
(4) Urvoy, Y. Chronologie du Bornu, Journal de la Société des Africanistes, 12, 2, 1942, pp. 271-289.
(5) Urvoy, Y. Histoire de l'Empire du Bornu, Mem. IFAN, 7, 1949, p.36